



# Hepatitis C

## Health Education Facts

### What is Hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a liver disease caused by the hepatitis C virus (HCV). HCV is a bloodborne virus, and is spread by contact with the blood of an infected person. There are at least 6 different genotypes (genetic make-up of the virus) of HCV, with genotype 1 the most common genotype seen in the United States.

### Who is at Risk for Hepatitis C?

The following are at risk for HCV:

- Recipients of clotting factors made before 1987.
- Recipients of blood products or solid organs before 1992.
- Long-term hemodialysis patients
- Injecting drug users
- Healthcare workers after known exposure, i.e., accidental needlestick
- People having sex with multiple sex partners
- People having sex with an infected steady partner.
- Infants born to infected mothers.

An estimated 3.9 million (1.8%) Americans have been infected with HCV, of whom 2.7 million are chronically infected. Most infections in the U.S. are due to illegal injection drug use.

### How is Hepatitis C Spread?

Hepatitis C virus, like hepatitis B, is spread by exposure to blood from an infected person, such as through a blood transfusion or sharing needles.

The risk of sexual transmission appears to be small. Several studies suggest infection seldom occurs from people with chronic hepatitis C to their steady sexual partners, so limitations on sexual activity with steady partners may not be needed. However, people with multiple sexual partners may be at greater risk of acquiring or transmitting hepatitis C, and other sexually transmitted disease, and should use condoms to reduce the risk.

There is **no** evidence that hepatitis C virus can be transmitted by casual contact, through

foods or by coughing or sneezing.

### What are the symptoms of Hepatitis C?

Some people experience appetite loss, fatigue, nausea and vomiting, vague stomach pain, and jaundice (a yellowing of the skin and whites of the eyes).

### How soon after infection do symptoms occur?

Symptoms may occur from two weeks to six months after exposure but usually within two months. Many people remain symptom-free for weeks or years before experiencing signs of liver dysfunction.

### When and for how long is a person able to spread Hepatitis C?

Some people carry the virus in their bloodstream and may remain contagious for years. The disease may occur in the acute form and be followed by recovery or it may become chronic and cause symptoms for years or the entire life.

### What is the treatment for hepatitis C?

There is no vaccine to prevent HCV. There are no special medications that can be used to treat people with acute HCV. The FDA has approved interferon alone and interferon-ribavirin combination therapy for the treatment of chronic HCV. Combination therapy is up to 40% successful in eliminating the virus in chronic HCV. Polyethylene glycol-tagged interferon (PEG-IFN) alone or in combination with ribavirin is the current standard of care for treatment of hepatitis C, eliminating the virus in up to 46% of genotype 1 cases, and 76% for types 2 and 3. However, infection with hepatitis C does not cause immunity, that is, it is possible to become reinfected with hepatitis C.

### Is donated blood tested for Hepatitis C?

Since May 1990, blood donation centers have routinely tested all donors for HCV. The risk of contracting HCV through a blood transfusion is less than one in one million.

**What are the possible consequences of Hepatitis C?**

Of every 100 persons infected with HCV about:

- 75-85 persons may develop long-term infection
- 70 persons may develop chronic liver disease
- 15 persons may develop cirrhosis over a period of 20-30 years; of these, 5% may develop hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC)
- Less than 3% will die from the consequences of long term infection (liver cancer or cirrhosis)

Hepatitis C is a leading indicator for liver transplants.

**Should Hepatitis C mothers breastfeed?**

There is no evidence that breastfeeding spreads HCV. HCV-positive mothers should consider abstaining from breastfeeding if their nipples are cracked or bleeding.

**What can persons with HCV infection do to protect their liver?**

- Stop using alcohol
- Stop using acetaminophen medications
- See your doctor regularly
- Get vaccinated against hepatitis A & B

**What can be done to prevent the spread of Hepatitis C?**

Prevention includes:

- Do not inject (shoot) drugs. If you do, never share needles, syringes, cotton, water, etc. Get vaccinated for hepatitis A & B.
- Do not share personal care items that may be contaminated with blood, e.g. razors, toothbrushes.
- Consider the risks when getting a tattoo, body piercing, or acupuncture. Make sure the artist or piercer follows good infection control.
- Healthcare workers should follow bloodborne pathogens procedures and get vaccinated for hepatitis B.
- Infected persons must not donate blood, semen, organs, or tissue.
- Infected persons should inform their dental or medical care providers of their infected status.
- If you have sex with multiple partners, you should use condoms correctly and every time. Get vaccinated against hepatitis B (and hepatitis A if involved with anal intercourse).

**Is there a vaccine for hepatitis C?**

There is no vaccine to prevent hepatitis C infection.

**For more information on Viral Hepatitis:**

Access the CDC website at:  
<http://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/>

or call the Hepatitis Information Line at:  
1-888-4HEPCDC  
1-888-443-7232

or write

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention  
Hepatitis Branch, Mailstop G37  
Atlanta, GA 30333

Information Provided by:  
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Epidemiology and Disease Prevention  
Kansas Department of Health & Environment  
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Copy Freely: AD1227-HCV  
June 2002